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MONTANA SECRETARY OF STATE



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the cheapest elections —
We are here to run the
best elections!"

Montana Elections And The Russians

by Secretary of State Corey Stapleton

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My graduating class from the United States Naval Academy was known as the "Top Gun" class, because our applications for appointment to Annapolis were greatly influenced by the blockbuster movie featuring Tom Cruise and Kelly McGillis. In that thriller movie, the confrontation between the U.S.S.R. versus U.S.A. was classic Cold War. In today's words: Russia vs 'Merica.

In the thirty years since the end of the Cold War, I've always kept an eye on Russia. Anyone who has studied Russian history knows that they are a very proud people, a strong nation with borders which have frequently moved as their power has ebbed and flowed over the centuries. Losing the Cold War to the United States was painful both politically and economically for the Russians. I'm sure they didn't 'move on' from defeat as quickly as Americans moved on after the Berlin wall fell my sophomore year at the Academy.

Four years ago, Russia successfully stole a huge piece of real estate called the Crimean peninsula from neighboring Ukraine. The

Additionally, almost half the states (including Montana) were scanned for weaknesses in our elections systems. While no votes were changed by the Russians in our 2016 election cycle, there was a clear and significant threat to our nation's ability to conduct fair elections.

In Montana, improving the integrity and security of our elections has been my administration's top priority. We are partnering with the Department of Homeland Security, Montana Department of Justice, Governor's office, and the National Guard in a variety of projects to test, train, and update security protocols both at the state and county levels. We have invested in two-factor authentication for our 56 counties. We're procuring new Information Technology (IT) systems and hardware. We completed a first-ever Mail Ballot Improvement Project in 2017 that provided valuable insight to mismatched signatures on ballots, and as a result, for the first time ever the Commissioner of Political Practices, the county Election Administrators, and the Office of the Secretary of State will be communicating

rest of the world watched helplessly. There is something to be learned from both the Crimean annexation in 2014 and the 2016 Russian interference with U.S. elections.

Russia always plays chess

The average American doesn't really have to pay attention to foreign affairs. We are the most powerful country in the world, we are geographically isolated, and domestic issues dominate our media. Only the most provocative worldly events catch our attention. Thank goodness we have an incredibly capable intelligence community. They know we can't play checkers when our opponents are playing chess. If you study the chaotic (orchestrated?) events that led up to invasion and annexation of Crimea, you realize that Russia is exceptional at political disruption, technological attacks, coordinated strikes, patience, and classic denial.

It isn't surprising that a dozen Russian intelligence agents were recently indicted for messing with our 2016 national elections. *That's what they do!* Debates about whether Russia likes to meddle with other countries' internal operations aren't very helpful. We know that Russia seeks and exploits many international vulnerabilities—not just in the United States. What is helpful, however, is going through a state and national process of updating and analyzing threats to our elections infrastructure. I guess you could say we can thank the Russians for that.

Threats and Opportunities

Russia used our own creative capitalism against us in 2016. Facebook is the leader of a new medium called social media, and the rapid expansion of Facebook's influence over voters had mostly been featured in dollars used for advocacy of candidates or issues. Russian operatives were able to exploit this new frontier of cyber persuasion, and coupled with traditional hacking, targeted large blocs of American voters with negative persuasion ads.

and working together to resolve mail ballot signatures that can't be reconciled after an election.

Ongoing Concerns

I have four concerns regarding security and our Elections. One, I'm worried that our rapid move towards elections collaboration with the federal government could eventually lead towards the nationalization of our elections. (Dept. of Homeland Security designated Elections as "critical infrastructure" for the first time ever in 2016).

Two, I worry about short-sighted arguments of saving money on elections by eliminating witnesses, judges, and physical polling locations. (Montana polling location elections are more accurate and secure currently than mailed absentee ballots).

Three, I'm concerned with IT trends that market new online and digital solutions for elections. (Think: Russian hacking).

And lastly, I worry about the consistency of our Office and the 56 counties' personnel training and capabilities in the face of potential attacks from a nation-state like Russia. We have to be continuously vigilant as a group, in order to be best-prepared for a cyber event against our election system. It's not going to be easy and it's not going to be cheap. But, as I've said before, we are not here to run the cheapest elections—we're here to run the best elections! And that's what we're going to do.



Corey Stapleton
Montana Secretary of State

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Secretary of State is to help
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future generations.***

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